

Thank You for Your Service¹

Reviewed by Major Cesar B. Casal*

*The soldier in combat is trapped within [a] tragic Catch-22. If he overcomes his resistance to killing and kills an enemy soldier in close combat, he is forever burdened with blood guilt, and if he elects not to kill, then the blood guilt of his fallen comrades and the shame of his profession, nation, and cause lie upon him. He is damned if he does, and damned if he doesn't.*²

Introduction

Far from the sands of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan, a war rages. This war is waged every minute of every day: in rush hour traffic, in bed, at work and at the dinner table.³ In his latest book, *Thank You for Your Service*, David Finkel sheds light on the fight that returning Soldiers face, many of whom suffer from wounds in their “hearts and minds” that cannot be seen, only felt. These wounds are borne not just by the Soldiers themselves, but also by the families that support, and at times carry, them in their journey back to “normal” life.⁴

The numbers are staggering. By Finkel’s calculations, some 400,000–600,000 servicemembers of the two million sent to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan will return with a diagnosis of either post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), or both.⁵ Finkel recognizes that the numbers are difficult to fathom, “especially in a country that paid such scant attention to the wars” that they are returning from.⁶ Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman argues that, as society reaps the benefits of creating a group of people who kill and destroy, that society becomes morally responsible for the consequences after the war is long over.⁷ *Thank You for Your Service* is a stark reminder of that responsibility.

About the Author

David Finkel, an editor and staff writer at the *Washington Post*, is a recipient of the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting for his series of articles in December

of 2005 about America’s “attempt to bring democracy to Yemen.”⁸ While those articles captured the essence of high-level U.S. policy efforts, he is no stranger to boots-on-the-ground military journalism. His first book, *The Good Soldiers*, covered his time as an embedded journalist with the 2-16th Infantry Battalion, 1st Infantry Division, during the Iraqi Surge from 2007 to 2008.⁹ This stirring effort landed him on multiple bestseller lists and garnered him numerous honors.¹⁰ In *Thank You for Your Service*, Finkel capitalizes on the bond he formed with those Soldiers, following them home and documenting their attempt to cope with the changes their wartime service has wrought in them.¹¹

Emotional Tour-de-Force

Finkel’s strength as a writer, if his Pulitzer prize is any indication, is his ability to simplify and humanize his narrative.¹² To address the difficulty of fathoming large numbers of “walking wounded” he tells his story through the eyes of various Soldiers, family members, and support personnel, each with a unique but emblematic slice of the day to day experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.¹³ Finkel approaches the narrative via a third-person limited perspective, giving the reader the sense of walking with the protagonists as they deal with frustrations that the Army, and life, throws at them.¹⁴

* Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Student, 63d Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate Gen.’s Legal Ctr. & Sch., U.S. Army, Charlottesville, VA.

¹ DAVID FINKEL, *THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE* (2013).

² LT. COL. DAVE GROSSMAN, ON KILLING: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL COST OF LEARNING TO KILL IN WAR AND SOCIETY 87 (1995).

³ FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 10–11.

⁴ *Id.* at 11–12.

⁵ FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 11.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ GROSSMAN, *supra* note 2 at 291–92.

⁸ *The 2006 Prize Winners—Explanatory Reporting*, THE PULITZER PRIZES, <http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2006-Explanatory-Reporting> (last visited Sept. 1, 2014).

⁹ Macmillan, Editors Comment to *David Finkel, The Good Soldiers*, MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS, <http://us.macmillan.com/thegoodsoldiers/davidfinkel> (last visited Sept. 1, 2014).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*; FINKEL, *supra* note 1 at 11–12.

¹² *The 2006 Prize Winners—Explanatory Reporting*, *supra* note 8 (explaining the prize category as “a distinguished example of explanatory reporting that illuminates a significant and complex subject, demonstrating mastery of the subject, lucid writing and clear presentation”).

¹³ See FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 3, 23, 35, 51 (introducing Adam and Saskia Schumann, Amanda Doster, Tausolo Aieti, and Nic DeNinno, respectively).

¹⁴ See *id.* at 141–43 (describing Tim Jung’s methodical thought process about how he will commit suicide in minute detail, up until the very moment that he decides not to go through with it and returns to work).

He had shown up early for orientation and been given a list of thirty-nine [Warrior Transition Battalion] WTB offices he would have to visit and get signatures from to prove that he had been there. He'd gone first to human resources, where the door was shut and locked and no one answered his knock even though the sign on the door said OPEN. He'd gone to the mailroom, where the guy working there had screamed over the music he was playing. . . He'd gone to the chaplain, who wasn't there. . . He'd gone to see his S-1, who wasn't there. . . ¹⁵

At its heart, *Thank You for Your Service* is a stinging criticism of the Army mental health system, and the subtext, although it may as well have been shouted from the rooftops, is that America is failing its service members yet again.¹⁶ Finkel strikes at the "Home of the Brave" not with harsh invective, but with quotidian accounts of the constant struggle for survival endured by the men and women in her service now left to navigate her bureaucratic maze.¹⁷ The sense of futility he expresses through his subjects' stories, and the resulting shame and self-reflection he may engender in the reader, are much more devastating than any explicit criticism could ever be.

Finkel also addresses a commonly neglected issue: the struggle of military spouses and their attempts to move on or hold their families together after war.¹⁸ Two of his main characters are military spouses: Amanda Doster, who is either unwilling or unable to move on from her husband's death,¹⁹ and Saskia Schumann, wife of one of the narrator-Soldiers, then-Staff Sergeant Adam Schumann.²⁰ While Army spouses fight a different sort of battle, they too face the daunting task of adjusting to the consequences of war; they typically act as first responders when that first flashback, outlash, or nightmare comes.²¹ Finkel also recounts the story of Ms. Kristy Robinson, who eventually left her husband Jessie when she could no longer handle who

he had become.²² Ms. Schumann's struggles highlight the morally fraught position the Army has put her, and all military spouses, in. Ms. Schumann knows that her husband is no longer the same man she married, and perhaps she is no longer compatible with him. But is she obligated to stay with him even though she will likely be unhappy? Is it her duty as a military spouse to stay? When, if ever, does that duty end? Is her happiness merely an inextricable part of the sacrifice that SSG Schuman made for our country?²³ These are difficult, if not unfathomable, questions to comprehend.

Finkel's criticism, expressed through his subjects, exposes the Army system as particularly reliant on pharmaceuticals and ineffectual "check the box" exercises that anyone who has served a day in uniform is all too familiar with.²⁴ He portrays then Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, General Peter Chiarelli, as a competent and well-intentioned officer, but one that was hopelessly overmatched when he set his sights on suicide prevention.²⁵ Indeed, while General Chiarelli may have been unsuccessful at reducing Army suicide rates during his tenure, he deserves credit for tackling Army culture with respect to mental health.²⁶

Finkel accurately captures the frustrating aspects of Army life: the endless gathering of signatures and rubber stamps,²⁷ the briefings of dubious value,²⁸ the bureaucratic, byzantine process of obtaining care,²⁹ the formations to nowhere,³⁰ and the ruffling of feathers.³¹ Manageable annoyances in normal life, these aspects take on a different

¹⁵ *Id.* at 143–44.

¹⁶ *See id.* at 149–50. Specialist (SPC) Tausolo Aieti's narrations show the Army at its worst. Here, he misses President Obama's presentment speech for Medal of Honor recipient Staff Sergeant (SSG) Salvatore Giunta, a speech that may have lifted SPC Aieti's spirits immensely, because he was busy gathering signatures for his in-processing sheet.

¹⁷ *See id.* at 43 (describing Aieti's selection process for the WTU/WTB, combining aspects of a tribunal, election, and a job interview).

¹⁸ *Id.* at 3, 23.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 121 (describing Amanda Doster's criteria for "The Perfect Man," with #5 being an "understanding of her undying love for [her deceased husband] James, and isn't threatened").

²⁰ *Id.* at 3.

²¹ *Id.* at 159–71 (documenting Kristy Robinson's experience with her husband, who returned from his war an abusive and violent man).

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.* at 177–79.

²⁴ *Id.* at 43, 144.

²⁵ *Id.* at 75–81. Finkel adeptly juxtaposes the story of First Lieutenant (1LT) James Gardner, who received the Medal of Honor in Vietnam, with General Chiarelli's struggle with suicides in the Army. After defeating scores of enemies and being gravely wounded in the process, 1LT Gardner finally destroyed an enemy bunker by detonating grenades he carried into it. His last words reportedly were "It's the best I can do," a reflection of his valiant but ultimately futile effort. Finkel later says General Chiarelli looks to be on the verge of saying the same after the suicide briefing.

²⁶ Greg Jaffee, *Army's Vice Chief of Staff, Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, Gives Closing Words of Advocacy*, WASH. POST (Jan. 28, 2012), http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/armys-vice-chief-of-staff-gen-peter-chiarelli-gives-closing-words-of-advocacy/2012/01/27/giQAjv1tYQ_story.html.

²⁷ FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 143–44; *see also id.* at 158 (discussing the unit's concern that a Soldier who committed suicide may not have attended a suicide briefing and that the unit would be blamed for the Soldier's death).

²⁸ *Id.* at 158–59.

²⁹ *Id.* at 129, 145.

³⁰ *Id.* at 204–05.

³¹ *Id.* at 136–38 (describing how an injured Soldier and his spouse, instead of focusing on the Soldier's upcoming retirement ceremony, were occupied with apologizing to a newly-arrived staff officer who was offended that they asked one of the Soldier's previous commanders to write his award recommendation).

tone and magnitude when evaluated in the context of post-combat stress reality. One of the narratives culminates in the description of the “Contract for Safety,” where Tausolo Aieti, a high-risk Soldier in the WTB, is made to sign a contract not to kill himself.³² A similarly disturbing exchange plays out later when Aieti meets his third case manager in three months, a role Finkel describes as the most critical contact in the treatment chain. The case manager, in her very first meeting with Aieti, before developing any significant rapport, delves right into a cringe-inducing risk-assessment checklist that serves no purpose other than to protect those who collect and file them.³³

Finkel’s account of the various treatment options betrays the seemingly futile nature of treating PTSD. Particularly depressing are the in-patient centers that seem more like prisons than places where people go to heal,³⁴ centers that have a set treatment period, as if healing a broken psyche is just like healing a broken ankle,³⁵ and treatments that cater more to the symptoms than their causes.³⁶ One cause that Finkel identifies for this disconnect is the burgeoning “military medical-industrial complex” that has led to vast expenditures on new treatment facilities with expensive trappings and questionable effects on outcomes.³⁷ To be sure, this is not an Army-specific concern. It is a central conflict that plagues all of modern medicine: the sick generate revenues³⁸ while the cured do not.

Sad but True?

One criticism of Finkel’s approach is the unending stream of negative events he portrays in the book. Every minor success is followed by some seemingly

insurmountable setback.³⁹ One step forward and two steps back. Finkel’s narrative builds a crescendo of hopelessness and ends in a note of cautious optimism, although even that is a generous characterization.⁴⁰ In an interview with an editor at Amazon.com, Finkel states that it was not necessarily his intent to be “ironic, sarcastic, or bitter” in deciding on the title of *Thank You for Your Service*.⁴¹ He also made a conscious effort to remove his personal opinion from the story.⁴² Despite his intent, however, *Thank You for Your Service* evokes a modern documentary film, a factual work created to elicit a specific set of emotions in the audience.⁴³ Finkel could have given more robust treatment to some of the Army’s positive initiatives regarding the PTSD/suicide problem. In one instance, he briefly mentions the link between Soldier and athlete traumatic brain injuries but doesn’t mention the Army’s cooperation with the National Football League or Boston University’s Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy Center. These are just examples of the Army’s willingness to explore unorthodox solutions and partnerships to combat PTSD and TBI and Finkel could have used such examples to express some optimism.⁴⁴ Finkel’s approach is likely much more effective from an emotional perspective, but it is not necessarily as balanced as it could have been. The one-sided treatment, at times, dilutes the book’s persuasive impact.

To be fair, Finkel does offer some leeway. He credits the good intentions and genuine efforts of the individuals involved in the Army’s response, from the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army on down.⁴⁵ And even though Finkel appears to lack sympathy for the Army’s ham-fisted efforts (as portrayed in the book), he recognizes the enormity of the problem.⁴⁶ Post-traumatic stress disorder is a challenging disorder to manage; multifaceted and ever-changing, its

³² *Id.* at 145. The contract states, surreally: “I [name] know that I am in a difficult state and may look for a way out by harming myself or others. I will not intentionally harm myself or others and if I have thoughts about harming myself or others I will contact my Chain of Command immediately. I agree to take these precautions and stay safe because I know that my life and the lives of those around me are worth holding on to.”

³³ *Id.* at 198–200.

³⁴ *See id.* at 54 (discussing Pueblo, Colorado treatment center’s initial three day lockdown period and then a gradual return of privileges through “good behavior”).

³⁵ *Id.* at 174. Finkel discusses the Veterans’ Administration operated Topeka, Kansas treatment program lasting seven weeks and the four week privately-run Pueblo, Colorado program throughout the book. Here, he introduces and contrasts the Pathway Home program in California run entirely with private donations and lasting for four months *minimum*.

³⁶ *See id.* at 166 (“All they did was drug him”).

³⁷ *Id.* at 43. Or as Adam Schumann describes: “Fucking nice is what it is. But you can gift wrap a piece of shit and it’s still a piece of shit.” *Id.*

³⁸ *See generally* COMM. ON CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN MED. RESEARCH, EDUC., AND PRACTICE, INST. OF MED. OF THE NAT’L ACADS., CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN MEDICAL RESEARCH, EDUCATION, AND PRACTICE 44 (Bernard Lo & Marilyn J. Field eds., 2009) (stating the tension between “professional goals of medicine” and the “financial goals of industry”).

³⁹ *See, e.g.,* FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 175 (describing Adam Schumann’s admittance into a treatment program that may be the best in the country and his wife expressing disappointment that the program is four months long).

⁴⁰ *See id.* at 256 (Schumann feeling as if his home is the most peaceful place in the world, at least right now.).

⁴¹ Chris Schluep, *Editorial Review and Interview with David Finkel*, AMAZON.COM, <http://www.amazon.com/Thank-Your-Service-David-Finkel/dp/0374180660/> (last visited Sep. 1, 2014).

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Vincent Stehle, *How Documentaries Have Become Stronger Advocacy Tools*, CHRON. OF PHILANTHROPY, <http://philanthropy.com/article/A-Revolution-in-Documentaries/129202/>.

⁴⁴ David Vergun, *NFL, Army Both Work to Combat Traumatic Brain Injury*, U.S. ARMY (Aug. 31, 2012), <http://www.army.mil/article/86544/>; *First Cases of Degenerative Brain Disease CTE Found in Veterans with Blast Injuries*, NAT. INST. OF NEUROLOGICAL DISORDERS & STROKE (Jun. 29, 2012), http://www.ninds.nih.gov/news_and_events/news_articles/CTE_found_in_veterans.htm.

⁴⁵ FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 75–81.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 77–78.

diagnosis is unique and specific to each individual.⁴⁷ Indeed, the Warrior mindset, cultivated from the first drill sergeant's piercing scream at the start of basic training, presents a barrier all its own: the "'suck it up and drive on' ethos has great survival value in the heat of battle, but it has also kept us from seeking helpful treatment after the battle."⁴⁸ Effective treatments transcend the individual: cultures and attitudes in the community play a role in the healing process, and changing them is neither a short nor simple process.⁴⁹ But as General Chiarelli stated, "[W]e have got to do better."⁵⁰

Conclusion

Is it a fair criticism to characterize a book as too depressing if it accurately reflects the current state of affairs that the author seeks to upend? To borrow a quote from a sports visionary, "You are what your record says you are."⁵¹ And if the American people are dissatisfied with any Soldier-suicide figure greater than zero, if even a single suicide represents an unacceptable loss, then change can only be for the better.⁵² If Finkel's goal is to effect that change, he has certainly written a means to do that with *Thank You for Your Service*, and pulled no punches in doing so.

In the end, *Thank You for Your Service* will impact all who read it, especially those who have little to no understanding of the realities of military service. This is not to say that the book has little value for judge advocates; to the contrary, its lessons may be much more meaningful, if less shocking. Civilians are generally so far removed from the experiences these Soldiers describe that the accounts may as well be fictional, something only experienced in novels and movies. But judge advocates, even if rarely in combat themselves, are in near constant contact with those who were. Judge advocates working in some of the core disciplines such as military justice, legal assistance, or administrative law are responsible for addressing many of the negative consequences of war on Soldiers and their families. *Thank You for Your Service* serves as that perfect reminder of who they are fighting for.

⁴⁷ AM. PSYCHIATRIC ASS'N, DIAGNOSTIC AND STATISTICAL MANUAL OF MENTAL DISORDERS 276-78 (5th ed. 2013) (discussing various risk and diagnostic factors for PTSD).

⁴⁸ LT. COL. DAVE GROSSMAN, ON COMBAT 289 (2004).

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 79.

⁵¹ *You Are Your Record*, WALL ST. J. (Dec. 30, 2008), <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB123060008676141231>.

⁵² Jaffee, *supra* note 26.